



Truth, Transparency and Transportation

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A 2009 [reform law](#) streamlined governance of Massachusetts' transportation network and eliminated redundancies in the system. But nobody claimed the savings would come close to eliminating the \$15-\$19 billion funding shortfall over the next two decades that had been identified by a state commission established to estimate the size of the transportation funding gap and make recommendations about how to address it.

Still, "reform before revenue" became a rallying cry. In other words, first prove that reform is saving money and that the new Massachusetts Department of Transportation is a good steward of taxpayer dollars, and then we'll we think about more funding.

Massachusetts and the long list of other states that face a similar dilemma should look to Washington State's [Gray Notebook](#) as the road map for solving their problem.

The Notebook, which is published quarterly, tells Washington citizens pretty much whatever they might want to know about how their transportation system is working. It provides data on everything from average commuting times for multiple corridors to on-time performance for ferries. There is data on the condition of roads and bridges and information about whether new transportation projects are on time and on budget.

And it's all presented in a format that Daniela Bremmer, director of the state transportation department's Strategic Assessment Office, calls "performance journalism." The Notebook provides gold-standard data in a way that tells a story and is accessible to the average reader.

How the Gray Notebook came to be is an interesting story. In the late 1990s, the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) was getting some bad press, and funding constraints had left new project development at a standstill.

State leaders decided that focusing on credibility and accountability was the best way to raise the money they desperately needed. Transportation Secretary Douglas McDonald, who had just come from Massachusetts, believed WSDOT needed to

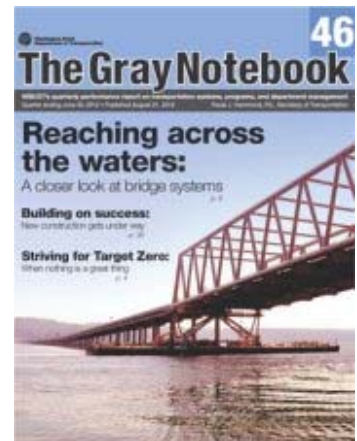
tell its story proactively, not just respond to problems. He wanted to talk up what the department was doing well and be transparent about what needed to improve.

The first Gray Notebook--as it came to be called because of the color of its cover--was published in 2001, and legislators loved it. Two years later, those legislators approved a 5-cent increase in the gas tax to fund new transportation projects. In 2005, they approved another 9.5-cent hike. Together, the increases provided about \$16 billion for 421 projects, around 330 of which have been completed.

But the Gray Notebook isn't just a vehicle for raising more transportation dollars. Corridor-congestion information informs future project selection, and Notebook data is used as an internal management tool to focus resources on areas where WSDOT needs to improve.

Most people intuitively get that a better transportation network facilitates job creation and economic development, while an insufficient one presents an obstacle to both. The Notebook's next frontier will be working with academia and economists to better quantify the economic impact of transportation decisions.

As Washington State's experience is showing, doing the right thing by being transparent about performance can be a win-win. Making investments based on objective data showing that an agency is using public money efficiently is how democratic government is supposed to work.



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